

C.F. Steele
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THE MOUNTAIN THAT FELL

By C. Frank Steele

Dawn was breaking cold and clear over the mountains. The Pass, wrapped in sleep, was still and shadowy as it awaited the new day already heralded by the softly reddening sky far to the east.

Nestled at the foot of towering Turtle Mountain lay the tiny coal mining town of Frank, one of the earliest settlements in the Crow's Nest Pass, at that time entering on its first boom days.

The villagers were sleeping. At the mine two men stood on the tipple while far below in the workings beneath the mountain other workmen were busy at the coal face. In the Canadian Pacific yards the work for the night had just about been cleaned up and the train crew employed in the yards and the night operator in the little, dimly lighted station were the only ones about.

To be exact it was nearing 4 o'clock on the morning of April 29, 1903. The folk in the town had been enjoying the first bit of spring warmth of the year, and life was pleasant in the busy little camp. There had been plenty of work, money was circulating freely and Frank was bound to grow, nothing could hold it back. That is what the businessmen said. Coal spelled power and here it was, a mountain of it.

The hands of the clock at the C.P.R. station pointed to 4. And at that moment the whole region was shaken by a mysterious noise like that of thunder as the top of Turtle Mountain gave way.

Something awful had happened. The train crew knew it, the night operator knew it. This was no ordinary explosion, no "bump." It might be an earthquake or it might be a ~~slide~~ slide.

It was just that--a slide. Hurtling down the mountain side 3000 feet came this tidal wave of rock. It swept away part of the village in the twinkling of an eye and snuffed out the lives of perhaps 85 persons. The exact number of the dead in this greatest rock slide in the history of Canada and one of the greatest in the annals of the world will never be known. That secret is locked in that 100 million tons of limestone and earth covering a thousand acres and standing in places a hundred feet deep.

Death came to these villagers of Frank without warning. They had no chance. There had been stories, now these are legends. There had been strange happenings in the Frank mine: breaking of timbers in the entry, wierd rumblings and crackings, squeezing in of walls. It was all very mysterious and uncanny and had become talk in the village.

Then came the fateful morning. This time the strange rumblings were followed by a terrifying roar, a shaking of the earth, a crushing of timbers on a scale hitherto unknown. Deep in the bowels of the earth the miners were "frozen" as they listened and waited.

They suspected an explosion and dread of the death-dealing after-damp, perhaps fire, seized them. But like real pitmen they soon pulled themselves together, this crew of 17 workers, and they began the long trek up the slope to the entrance. The way was clear until they reached a point a hundred feet from the top. They could go no farther. There their path was blocked by a wall of rock.

Their plight grew ^{es}deperate. Then one of the wiser ones thought of the air shaft.

"Let's try the air shaft," he counselled.

They did. But again they were thwarted by a wall of rubble.

Then it was that they decided to literally dig their way out. It was a gamble but it might work and they refused to be licked. For 12 hours they toiled and suffered but they were eventually rewarded by breaking through the outcropping coal on the mountainside into the sunlight.

Their gameness had won them life and freedom but what a spectacle of desolation greeted their eyes. Their beautiful Valley, just touched by the magic of spring, was defaced, the mine entrance and tipple swept away, part of the village entombed and many loved ones dead. The horrible ~~death~~ aftermath of what they had heard and seen deep in the mine lay before them. It was too much, some broke ^{down} ~~and~~ and wept under their overwhelming sorrow.

Few in the path of that falling mountain escaped. And few bodies were recovered. A few on the outer edges of the slide were rescued alive. It was an instance indeed of "one being taken and the other left." One miner's cottage on the fringe of the avalanche was found to contain six dead and three living. Alex Leitch, his wife and four children were dead; three other children, one a baby, were alive. and amazingly to add, unharmed.

Miracles? Yes, there were many that fateful morning at Frank.

Take the case of the Frank Ennis family. Frank and his wife and their four children were fast asleep when the slide occurred. Their house was in a row of cottages caught and crushed like matchwood.

Sam awoke to find himself partially pinned under the timbers of his home. He managed to free himself and ~~was~~ his thoughts were with his wife and kiddies back there somewhere he knew not where. He found them somewhere in that dread blackness, ~~and found~~ three together and extricated them from their prison. One year old Gladys was missing. Mrs. Ennis groped about for her baby and soon touched the tiny body lying in soft mud and slime. It appeared to be dead but wrapping it up in a blanket she stumbled out into the open and over the rocks to a house that showed a speck of light in the darkness. In the warm cottage she found to her joy that her baby was still alive. All this Mrs. Ennis did, this rescue of her baby, despite a broken shoulder blade but she said afterwards she felt no pain.

Many acts of heroism were enacted that morning when Turtle Mountain collapsed. Survivors tell of the cool heroism of a C.P.R. operator ^(name not available) and ~~and~~ ^{Sid Choquette,} and dust, brakeman, who braved the sea of debris, ~~ghastly in the morning gloom,~~ westbound passenger and managed to get beyond the avalanche in time to flag down the train and perhaps prevent a second major disaster. The full story of this remarkable feat has never been told. The historians have overlooked it but the oldtimers remember.

That picturesque Pass pioneer, "Cap" Beebe of Blairmore, recalled the slide a few years ago. Said he: "I remember it as if it happened yesterday. I was awakened by a most terrific noise and vibrations. I thought at first it was thunder. I lay still waiting for further crashes and for rain but none came and again fell asleep.

"Later, I was awakened by a loud pounding at my door. Getting up I found Felix Montlbetti, the section foreman, standing there greatly excited.

"It's gone!" he gasped.

"What's gone?" I asked.

"The town of Frank."

"The town of Frank?" I repeated mystified. "Was there ~~an~~ an explosion, was it blown up?"

"No," he replied, "The mountain fell on it."

"That was ^{the} terrible noise I had heard. I hurriedly dressed and accompanied Felix down to Frank. What a sight greeted us! I shall never forget it. It was more than an hour after the slide but rocks were still rumbling and falling down the sides of the mountain and continued to do so for days. There was no such thing as relatives searching for their missing kinfolk--they were buried beyond recovery."

The first word flashed to the outside world from the scene of the horror^r read like this: "An earthquake has happened,... immediately afterwards what appeared to be a volcanic eruption took place at the top of Turtle Mountain which overlooks the town, throwing millions of tons of rock out..."

What caused the slide? This is what a geological report says: "The slide was due, not to a single cause, but to a combination of causes, among which the opening up of large chambers in the mine, situated under the base of the mountain, may have been a contributory cause." Today huge fissures may be seen atop Turtle Mountain, warning of possible future disturbances.

Another point of interest in seeking the cause of the appalling disaster is the fact that an earthquake occurred in the region in 1901. It was ~~a~~ slight but it may have done its work~~x~~ in weakening that vast ~~body~~ of limestone overthrust on shale, sandstone and coal.

Just how the mountain got its name is not known although old-timers used to say it was called Turtle Mountain because it moved slowly like a turtle. Be that as it may, it moved far from slowly the ~~early~~ morning of April 29, 1903.

There is an interesting sidelight on Turtle Mountain and the region roundabout. This throws some light on how the valley received its name--the Crow's Nest pass. According to the story as told by the Indians--they were the warlike Blackfeet--a great battle was fought there under the shadow of Turtle Mountain. The rivals were the Blackfeet and the Crows from Montana territory. That was back in the 1850's. The Crows had been making horse-stealing raids into Canada and eventually the Bloods and Peigans set out to fight it out with the invaders. A fierce battle ensued in which the Crows were ^{all} killed. The Blackfeet nation were complete masters and thereafter the area the Crows had made their hideout was called the "Crows Nest" by the Indians.

There appears to be good grounds for this tale. Indian chiefs who took part in the battle, one of the most decisive in that era just prior to the coming of the white men, vouch for it. And there it was, this old Indian battlefield, buried by the vast flood of rock that formed the Frank Slide.

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